



Mongolia

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. However, the law limits proselytizing.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. Some religious groups faced bureaucratic harassment from local governments or were denied the right to register.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, sometimes involving pressure on persons who had converted to Christianity.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 604,247 square miles and a population of 2.9 million. Buddhism and the country's cultural traditions are closely linked. When government controls on religion and on traditional practices ended in 1990, there was an increase in Buddhist activity. Local scholars claim that more than 90 percent of all citizens ascribe to some form of Buddhism, although practice varies widely. Lamaist Buddhism of the Tibetan variety is the traditional and dominant religion.

Ethnic Kazakhs, most of whom are Muslim, are the largest ethnic minority, constituting approximately 6 percent of the population nationwide and 80 percent in the western province of Bayan-Olgii. Muslims operate approximately 40 mosques in Bayan-Olgii and 4 Islamic centers in Ulaanbaatar, serving nearly 3,000 students combined. The mosques and Islamic centers receive financial assistance from religious organizations in Kazakhstan, Turkey, and the Gulf States.

There is a small but growing number of Christians. Church officials estimate that more than 4 percent of the population practice Christianity, of which an estimated 90 percent are Protestant and 9 percent are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon). Roman Catholics and members of the Russian Orthodox Church together account for the remaining 1 percent. Some citizens practice shamanism, often in tandem with another religion, but there are no reliable statistics on their number.

Throughout the country, there were 432 registered places of worship, 217 of which were Buddhist, 161 were Christian, 44 were Muslim, and 5 each were Baha'i and shamanistic. During the period covered by this report, the Ministry registered 18 churches, 20 mosques, and 3 shaman temples. Evangelical Christians estimated that there were 250 unregistered evangelical churches throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free

practice of religion. However, the law limits proselytizing, and some religious groups seeking registration face burdensome bureaucratic requirements and significant delays (see Restrictions). The Constitution explicitly recognizes the separation of church and state.

Although there is no state religion, many government officials are Buddhists who believe that Buddhism is the "natural religion" of the country. The Government contributed to the restoration of several Buddhist sites that are important religious, historical, and cultural centers. The Government did not otherwise subsidize Buddhist or any other religious groups.

A religious group must register with the Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs (MJHA) to legally function as an organization. Because registrations are only valid for 12 months, religious institutions must reregister annually. This practice allows the Government to vet applications to ensure that religious organizations are qualified, as well as to supervise and limit the number of places of worship and clergy. The Government, particularly at the local level, has sometimes used the registration process as a mechanism to limit the number of places for religious worship. However, the central government reportedly fined at least one local government for failing to register Christian churches.

Groups must provide the following documentation to the MJHA when registering: a letter to the MJHA requesting registration, a letter from the city council or other local authority granting approval to conduct religious services, a brief description of the organization, its charter, documentation of its founding, a list of leaders, brief biographic information on the person wishing to conduct religious services, and the expected number of worshippers. While the MJHA possesses the ultimate authority to approve an organization's application, this is largely pro forma. In practice local legislative bodies adjudicate the applications, and separate local registration is often necessary, particularly when groups seek to operate in the countryside. The Ulaanbaatar City Council and other local legislative bodies require similar documentation prior to granting approval to conduct religious services.

Religious visas are not granted.

Religious instruction is not permitted in public schools. Buddhist schools may receive public funding for teaching the standard curriculum to students; however, expenses for religious and special subjects must be covered by other sources.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Both the preliminary registration and annual renewal process are burdensome for religious groups. The length of time needed, and documentation required, to complete the process serve as a disincentive for some organizations from applying. Christian groups reported that local officials stated there were "too many" churches or that there should at least be parity in the registration of new Buddhist temples and new Christian churches.

Authorities in Tuv Province, near Ulaanbaatar, continued to deny registration to Christian churches. There were no churches registered in the province, and several churches were again denied registration during the reporting period. Tuv authorities further complicated the registration process by requiring registration at the village, county, and province level. In previous years registration took place only at the provincial level. In response to a formal complaint filed by the National Human Rights Commission in May 2007, Tuv provincial authorities were reportedly fined by the Government for not registering Christian churches.

Unregistered religious institutions were often able to function in practice. However, they were subjected to harassment by authorities and were unable to sponsor foreign clergy for visas. Unregistered churches also experienced harassment in the form of frequent visits from local tax officers and police for their activities, although no fines were reported.

The Muslim community in Ulaanbaatar reported difficulty with registration and land acquisition for proposed mosques in the provinces of Darkhan-Uul and Orkhon. They reported no problems, however, with the ongoing construction of the Muslim cultural center and mosque in Ulaanbaatar.

A Ministry of Education directive bans combining foreign language or other training with religious teaching or instruction. While monitoring compliance, particularly in the capital area, remained strict, there were no reported violations of the ban during the reporting period. Religious groups that violate the law may have requests for extensions of their registration revoked; if individuals violate the law, the Government may recommend that their employer terminate their employment. No such cases were reported during the reporting period.

While the law does not prohibit proselytizing, it limits such activity by forbidding the spread of religious views to nonbelievers by "force, pressure, material incentives, deception, or means which harm health or morals or are psychologically damaging." During the reporting period, there were no instances of prosecutions or loose interpretations of this law to restrict peaceful religious activities.

During an immigration crackdown in October 2007, a number of foreigners were taken to police stations for long periods of questioning because they were not carrying their passports when the police stopped them. Expatriates from Asian countries received particular scrutiny, and many believed that the Government used the immigration crackdown as a pretext to "crack down" on Christianity.

In August 2007 the Khamba Lama, the head of the largest school of Buddhism in the country, visited Bayankhongor Province. During the visit, provincial officials reportedly convened a mandatory meeting of government officials with the Khamba Lama so the latter could explain the importance of Buddhism in the country and to conduct a Buddhist ceremony. Some government officials who attended, who were also Christian, subsequently complained that they had been involuntarily involved in a Buddhist ceremony. The Khamba Lama also reported difficulties in registering new temples in Ulaanbaatar due to the MJHA approval process.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In May 2008 the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA), a nonsectarian nongovernmental organization originally organized by leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, held a symposium on religious freedom. Participants included domestic experts as well as experts from the United States, Russia, and other Asian countries. The country's president, Nambaryn Enkhbayar, gave the event his full support, and representatives from IRLA stated that the response from the Government was positive.

Section III. **Societal Abuses and Discrimination**

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the period covered by this report. Citizens were generally tolerant of the beliefs of others; however, there was friction between Christians, particularly foreign Christians, and non-Christian citizens in some areas.

On a number of occasions during the reporting period, church authorities reported that foreign Christians in Ulaanbaatar became victims of assault or other crimes, although it was not clear whether these crimes were religiously motivated. According to a church leader, in March 2008 a man accosted four foreign Christians on the street, demanded money, and threatened to "get them" at their church in the event of nonpayment. Also in March a group of apparently drunken teenagers allegedly assaulted a foreign Christian. In February 2008 the leader of an interdenominational church, who was also a foreigner, reported that someone threw a brick through a window at his family's home.

In Bayankhongor Province, tensions continued between the majority Buddhist population and foreign Christians. During the reporting period, it was alleged that Christian converts vandalized a Buddhist ovoo (sacred rock pile) and destroyed a number of personal Buddhas. Christian pastors made comparable

complaints against Buddhists. Similar incidents reportedly took place in Tuv Province and the Baganuur district of Ulaanbaatar.

There were reports that individuals who converted to Christianity were pressured by disapproving family members to renounce their faith. A church leader reported that in Ulaanbaatar a 25-year-old man who had converted to Christianity and was about to start a mission was locked inside his home by family members in February 2008. The man eventually canceled his mission.

Some citizens, who believe that Buddhism is the "natural religion" of the country, criticized the alleged use of material incentives to attract potential converts to Christianity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. During the reporting period, U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom with government officials at the local, provincial, and national level. This dialogue served to articulate a number of U.S. government concerns, particularly registration difficulties experienced by Christian groups and others. Embassy officials encouraged the National Human Rights Commission to enhance its efforts in addressing religious freedom.

The Embassy maintained contact with the local representatives of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and the U.N. Development Program to discuss religious freedom. Embassy officials also met frequently with religious leaders across the country.

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